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Fast Start plan for commuter trains on FEC promoted

South Florida Business Journal by Kevin Gale, Editor in Chief

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Tri-Rail could start passenger service along the **Florida East Coast Railway** in as little as three years under a plan being promoted by the agency that runs the commuter rail service.

The \$271.9 million Fast Start plan would use an east-west FEC Railway spur in Pompano Beach to establish a link to the Tri-Rail right of way along Interstate 95. The initial concept calls for some Tri-Rail service to head south from Pompano Beach to downtown Miami along the FEC, which runs through the downtown areas of Fort Lauderdale and Hollywood.

The South Florida Regional Planning Council, which includes Broward and Palm Beach counties, passed a motion Monday, encouraging the **Florida Department of Transportation**, the South Florida Regional Transit Authority (which operates Tri-Rail) and the FEC to work together on a passenger rail plan. The Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, which includes Palm Beach County, passed a resolution in January.

The FEC said last year that it has had a series of long-running conversations with FDOT about adding commuter service, but some SFRTA board members said they were blindsided in August when they found out privatization of the agency's Tri-Rail service was on the table.

Under SFRTA's concept, the existing Tri-Rail line would be called the orange line and have 26 trains a day, while the new service to downtown Miami would be dubbed the blue line

and have 24 trains a day, according to a PowerPoint presentation prepared by SFRTA Executive Director [Joseph Giuliatti](#) for the Miami-Dade Metropolitan Planning Organization.

A second phase of the project would add 26 more trains to the coastal green line, which would then equal the current Tri-Rail line in traffic. A third phase would add a red line running six trains a day from Jupiter to downtown Miami along the FEC.

Many members of the business community have supported passenger service on the FEC as a more convenient alternative than I-95 and the existing Tri-Rail service for downtown office workers. Most of the coastal downtown areas grew up around the railroad tracks after [Henry Flagler](#)'s railroad arrived in the late 1800s.

A major hurdle for Tri-Rail may be getting FDOT to pay for the \$271.9 million in capital costs, which include \$53.1 million related to tracks, \$30.2 million for stations, \$48.6 million for communications and signals, \$23.2 million for crossings and \$100.6 million in engineering and other costs.

The plan does not list any new expenses for engines and cars, noting that Tri-Rail has 24 new cars and 10 locomotives on order.

SFRTA expects the expansion would cost \$15 million a year to operate, with \$5.8 million to \$9 million coming from fares, savings and reallocation of resources. SFRTA wants to cover the remaining shortfall of \$6 million to \$9.2 million by asking 14 municipalities to pay a premium for the 18 stations.

South Florida developers have talked about the possibility of integrating stations into new office or mixed-use developments.

The PowerPoint says SFRTA is confident it could begin its so-called Coastal Service in three to five years, while eight years has already been spent on the South Florida East Coast Corridor (SFECC) study. That study also envisions commuter service along the FEC, but lost momentum after the recession walloped government budgets.

While SFRTA wants to enlist FDOT as a partner, the PowerPoint is somewhat critical of the state agency's approach.

It says the last FDOT SFECC steering committee was held in April 2010 and the state agency has excluded partners, such as the Miami-Dade MPO, from direct involvement for more than a year.

"FDOT holds meetings with the FEC on at least a monthly basis – no partners are ever invited," the PowerPoint states. "FACT: The federal government looks for partnerships before funding a project – we need a regional partnership for this project to be successful!"